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Ana A. Peña López

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Photo of mural by Claudia Morales Haro. El Salvador, 1999

Central American Labor Migration, 1980-2000

Ana Alicia Peña López
Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

English translation by Andrea Friedmann. SPANISH LANGUAGE VERSION OF THIS ARTICLE IS AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST

INTRODUCTION

In this essay I will describe and reflect upon emigration from the Central American sub-region, which, after Mexico, provides the second major migratory flow from Latin America towards the United States. This flow has become a serious problem of demographic management and international policy for Mexico, in part because the Mexican territory is used as a point of entry to the United States (see map 1), and because of the intense pressure that, in recent times, the U.S. government has brought to bear on its Mexican counterpart to stop the migratory flow from our territory. In the context of the complexity of this phenomenon in Latin America, the Central American case is a means to approach a little-known situation related to labor migration: interregional migrations and the existing connection between migrations caused by politics and social violence in the region during the '80s, as well as the "use as labor" of these refugees or internally displaced persons (see map 2).

A complex migratory net can be found in Central America; its principal destination is the United States, which offers greater possibilities for employment and better living conditions. But this region is also interconnected to other places that operate as poles of attraction for a population that, thirty years ago, lived mostly in rural areas and was subjected to an incipient capitalist development based on agricultural exports which, with the migratory processes existing in the region's interior (in times of peace as well as of armed conflict), has produced gradual proletarianization and urbanization without translating into improvements in living conditions, but rather, greater pauperization.

1. DEEPER CAUSES OF EMIGRATION: CENTRAL AMERICA, A REGION OF PLUNDER AND OVEREXPLOITATION

The "waist-line of the continent", as Armando Bartra has called it, is formed by Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama. The region extends over an area of 524 thousand square kilometers (202,318 square miles) and is presently inhabited by approximately 36 million people (see table 1) (Geographica 400-405). Around 1990, CEPAL (1993) estimated that close to 50% of the region's population lived in rural areas[1], while 75% of the total population of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua lived in poverty. The

proportion of those who survived under conditions of extreme poverty reached 50% of the total population, among which the majority were inhabitants of rural areas. Such alarming destitution contrasts sharply with Central America's vast natural wealth (petroleum, natural gas, non-metallic minerals, timber-yielding forests, fishing potential, drinking water, biodiversity, etc.) and productive wealth (important agricultural areas producing coffee for export, forest plantations, tourism, and an incipient maquiladora industry) (Bartra 6). The region also possesses strategic wealth due to its geographical location and the shape of its territory. The Central American isthmus is an unsurpassable corridor of increasing commerce that flows from the East Coast of the United States towards the Pacific (Barreda).

The contrast between destitution and wealth in Central America is the result of the specific way that capitalism was implanted and developed in the region since the mid 1800s. Since that time the colonialist economies, first European and later American, considered the region a place rich in foods and prime materials. The promotion of a coffee, cocoa, wood, banana and sugar cane plantation economy characterized the development of this region as one of agricultural exports, intensively using the labor capacity of a population that found itself inserted in pre-capitalist, community- and peasant-focused dynamics. The use of domestic communities as the labor force for capitalist plantations implied everything from the violent expropriation of lands to state legislation favoring forced labor. In fact, the most advantageous way to exploit the work of peasants and indigenous communities in the region was through the establishment of patterns of temporal migration to plantations producing for export, which did not result in the complete dissolution of the reproductive domestic spaces of peasants and indigenous peoples. The limited maintenance of the domestic community meant that its inhabitants had a place to plant and harvest basic foods; however, it did not permit them complete reproduction, forcing them to become wage-laborers for the foreign-owned agricultural plantations.[2]

This means of insertion into the world's capitalist productive dynamics helped define the characteristics of the region's development processes: the plunder of resources constitutes a recurring guideline (it promotes the accumulation of capital with a view to a world market, but not towards development within the region), while at the same time the exploitation of the workforce is based on maintaining part of the population in conditions of destitution within a process of continuous (but unfinished) proletarianization.[3] Thus, the migration from one rural area to another (towards the enclaves of exporters of agricultural products) and the migration from rural areas to cities are generalized phenomena in the region, occurring at differing times but existing as parts of a single process involving savage capitalist development.

This is not an attempt to write the history of this complex regional process, which is not exclusive to Central America, but is, rather, shared with other regions of the colonized world plundered by a polar dynamic of capitalist development. The purpose here is to point out the traits that constitute the core of the more modern processes which apparently do not have roots in the accumulation of capital but that, in reality, are only an expression of it. The Central American emigration is a historical phenomenon that does not arise from the wars unleashed in the '80s in its countries. However, the armed conflicts within the region did contribute to the modification of the magnitude, the paths, and the characteristics of the migratory flows.

Most interesting to emphasize in the following description of the regional migratory process is that the proletarianization of the Central American population and the role played by these migrations in this process, developed quickly during the time that capitalist accumulation occurred, in a context of extreme social violence and war against its inhabitants. This did not diminish once peace was reestablished, especially if the misery in which the population lives is considered to constitute a form of violence that produces, among other things, massive emigration under the worst conditions.

TABLE 1
POPULATION AND TERRITORY IN CENTRAL AMERICA, 1998

Country	Territorial Size (km2)	Population	Population Density (Inhab/km2)	Total indigenous population	Indigenou people in proportion to total population (%)
Nicaragua	129,494	4,717,000	36.4	235,850	5
El Salvador	21,040	5,839,000	277.5	291,950	5
Guatemala	108,890	12,335,600	113.3	5,427,664	44
Honduras	112,090	5,997,000	53.5	419,790	7
Belize	22,960	236,000	10.3	59,000	25
Panama	78,200	2,779,000	35.5	166,740	6
Costa Rica	51,100	3,674,490	71.9	367449	1
Total	**523,774**	**35,578,090**		**6,968,443**	**19.6**

SOURCE: Author, based on Geographica.

2. THE CENTRAL AMERICAN MIGRATORY PROCESS, 1980 -2000

2.1. Background

Since the end of the '60s, Central America has experienced situations of extreme social violence resulting from a profound economic, political, and social crisis in the region. Limiting military dictatorships and authoritarian governments cost the Central American people enormous bloodshed and the exile of broad portions of its population.

The migratory processes occurring in the region before the '80s were fundamentally of an economic and temporary nature, and their destinations were, basically, the exporting agricultural plantations or capital cities. Likewise, there were

small nuclei of workers that migrated towards the United States, although their volume was significantly lower and, often, they remained employed for a short time in order to return to their places of origin (Aguayo 51 and 115).[4] This process has been described by Honduran sociologist José Rafael del Cid (33):

> The prevalence of migration from the countryside to the city was very marked in El Salvador and Nicaragua. In the other countries of the region the presence of the banana industry, located in the coastal areas, created another important point of attraction. A third destination for internal migrants was the departments[TN] with agricultural frontiers, such as Retalhuleu, Petén, and Izabal, in Guatemala, or Colón and Olancho, in Honduras.

Del Cid points out that migrations from the countryside to the city and those to areas of banana production are *permanent migrations* because, in the case of the cities, behind this emigration from the countryside was the "capitalist penetration into agriculture, which expelled the rural population as it intensified." Given the productive, packaging, and transporting process in the production of banana, a permanent and wage-earning workforce was required. In the case of other agricultural products for export, such as coffee, cotton, and sugar cane, the kind of employment required of the workforce was seasonal and not fully involved in wage-labor. This is the reason why capitalist plantations held only a temporary migratory attraction. In this first stage, the migrant population was basically of rural origin, mostly peasant, preponderantly male, of an active age, illiterate or with very little schooling, and possessing few skills for work.

2.2. The Tragic Decade: The Eighties

Even though at first sight the migratory flows from Central America in the '80s could be considered political or social, due to violent events and wars occurring in some of the countries of the region (Nicaragua in 1978, El Salvador and Guatemala in 1980), they must be brought up in this retelling of labor migrations because they are processes that contributed in a fundamental manner to restructuring the distribution of the existing population in Central America until that time, and, consequently, generated modifications in the region's labor markets. At the same time, to these migrants (denominated "refugees" or "internally displaced persons"[5] by national governments and international organizations) they signified displacement, due, in fact, to political and social causes in which their needs for survival were partly or wholly neglected by those international organizations responsible for looking after them (such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). This forced them to find work as wage-laborers wherever they arrived. Therefore, although initially these were not migrations with the purpose of obtaining work, they later became so.

The events of this period are helpful for a more complete understanding of the fact that migratory tendencies existing before the war in Central America, generated by the dynamics of the accumulation of capital in the region, were not only maintained during the period of conflict, but were strengthened by it through the acceleration of the processes of expulsion from the countryside (of the peasant population and indigenous communities, who owned small properties), of urbanization, and proletarianization of Central Americans. During the decade beginning in 1980, according to a report by CEPAL (9) concerning the impact of Central American

Photo by Claudia Morales Haro. El Salvador, 1999

IT IS ESTIMATED THAT CLOSE TO 50% OF THE REGION'S POPULATION LIVED IN RURAL AREAS, WHILE 75% OF THE TOTAL POPULATION OF EL SALVADOR, GUATEMALA, HONDURAS AND NICARAGUA LIVED IN POVERTY. THE PROPORTION OF THOSE WHO SURVIVED UNDER CONDITIONS OF EXTREME POVERTY REACHED 50% OF THE TOTAL POPULATION, AMONG WHICH THE MAJORITY WERE INHABITANTS OF RURAL AREAS.

migrations produced by violence, one million Central Americans emigrated to another country of the region or to Mexico. Add to that group another million people displaced within their own countries and the number of migrants in the region is calculated to be two million between 1980 and 1989[6] (see table 2 and map 2).

It is important to note that CEPAL's study does not include emigrants who abandoned their countries during former periods (for example, in the case of hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans who traveled to Honduras in former decades, and the large number of agricultural workers that emigrated to the eastern departments of Guatemala, or the "traditional" movements of Guatemalan day laborers to harvest coffee on the farms of Chiapas). CEPAL'S calculations also exclude —an even more serious omission— Central Americans living in the United States who, according to the same institution, constituted over one and a half million people in 1989 (CEPAL).

Subtracting the 235,200 legal Central Americans recognized by the U.S. Census Bureau in 1978 from CEPAL's estimated number, according to Sergio Aguayo's study cited earlier, 1,265,000 Central Americans entered the United States, legally or illegally, between 1978 and 1989. Thus, in reality, the number of Central American migrants in the period between 1978 and 1989 rose to some 3,265,000 people, or 11.3% of the total population of the region at that time. Taking into account that the countries most involved in these processes of massive emigration were Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, the migrant population compared to the total population of these nations would come to 18%. There can be no doubt that this meant a true *demographic transformation*, as well as a transformation in the workforce, of vast importance to these countries and the region as a whole.

Those countries that did not directly experience such extreme situations as civil war (Belize, Costa Rica and Honduras), received the refugee population (recognized as such or not)

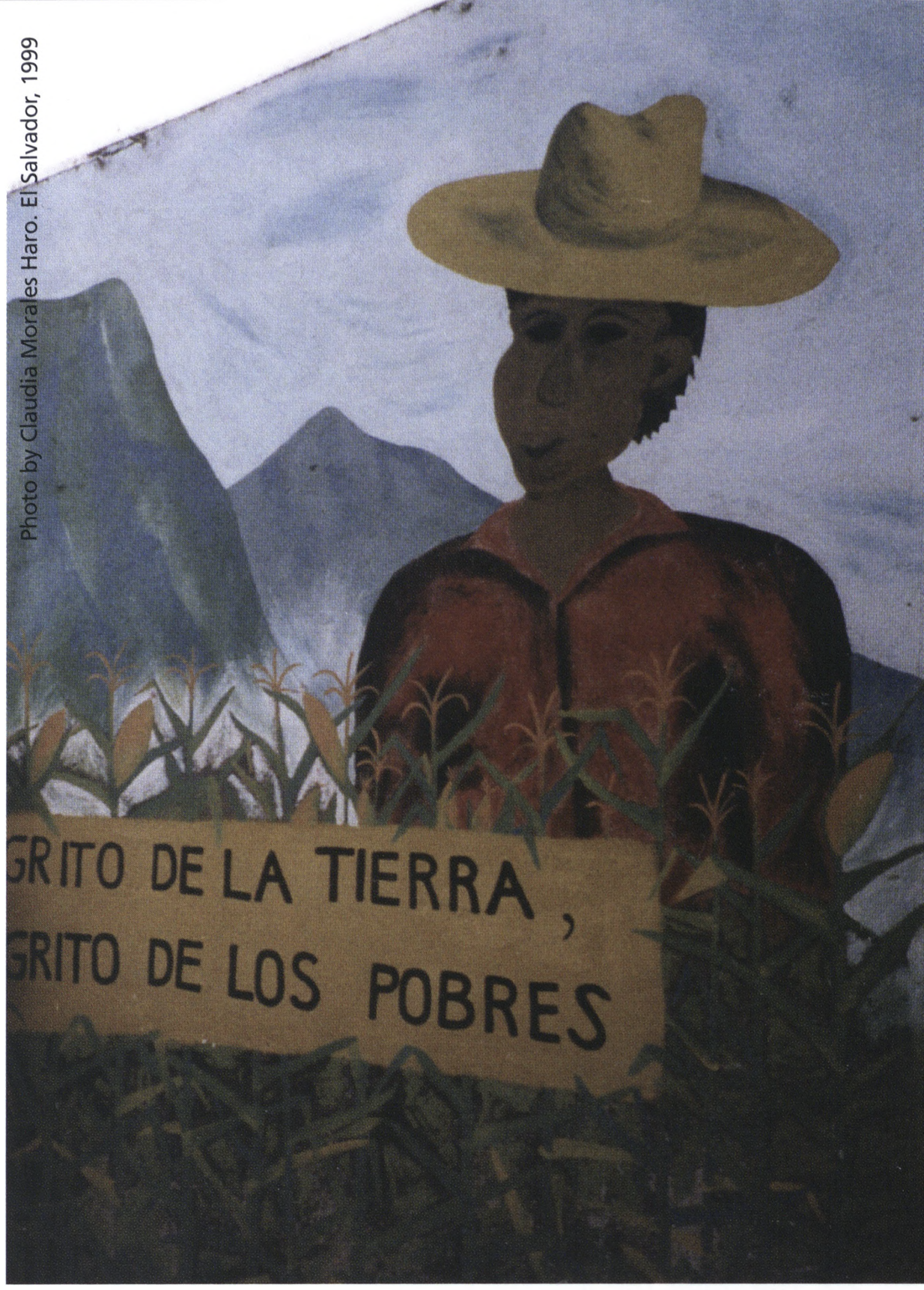


Photo by Claudia Morales Haro. El Salvador, 1999

escaping the violence, misery, and death (see table 2 and map 2). Many of these migrants were never recognized as refugees and, therefore, had to look for economic alternatives in the rural and urban labor markets to survive. Needless to say, in most of these cases the jobs they found meant that they had to subject themselves to overexploitation of their labor.[7]

TABLE 2

INTERREGIONAL MIGRATIONS IN CENTRAL AMERICA, 1980-1989[a]

(Thousands of people)

		International Migrations						
Country Receiving	Total Population	Total Migrant Population	For economic reasons	Acknow -ledged Refugees	Unacknowledged Refugees	Internally Displaced Persons	Repatriated	Migration According to Total Population (%)
Total	24,578	1,815	217	91	491	965	51	7.4
Belize	178	29	7	4	18			16.3
Costa Rica	2,800	290	170	40	80			10.4
El Salvador	5,000	417		b	4	400	13	8.3
Guatemala	8,700	415	40	3	180	188	4	4.8
Honduras	4,400	259		37	200	22		5.9
Nicaragua	3,500	405		7	9	355	34	11.6

[a] Figures are approximations
[b] Less than 500 people
SOURCE: CEPAL 47.

TABLE 6
EXPULSIONS OF UNDOCUMENTED MIGRANTS BY MEXICAN AUTHORITIES, BY COUNTRY OF ORIGIN, 1990-2000

Country of Origin	1990	% Of Total	1995	% Of Total	2000	% Of Total
Guatemala	58 845	46.5	48 802	50.7	78 819	46.7
El Salvador	45 598	36.1	18 327	19.0	37 203	22.0
Honduras	14 954	11.8	25 775	26.8	45 604	27.0
Nicaragua	3 039	2.4	2 300	2.4	1 938	1.1
Other Countries1	4 004	3.2	1 084	1.1	5 202	3.1
Total of Central Americans	122 436	96.8	95 204	98.9	163 564	96.9
Total	126 440	100.0	96 288	100.0	168 766	100.0

[1] Includes countries such as Ecuador, Peru, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Iraq and others.
SOURCE: Author, based on Castillo and Palma 151; and Gomez, "Polleros" 40.

2.3. Transit Migration of Central Americans towards the United States

Upon observing the migration of Central Americans towards the United States, I found what in Mexico has been called transit migrations, migrations "in transit to a third country." However, some of those migrants must often remain for long periods (from six months to three years or more) in Mexican cities or agricultural plantations in order to obtain sufficient resources to continue their journey. Some even stay permanently in Mexico. This process begins in the mid '80s and, although one might believe that with the relative quieting of the civil wars it should have been interrupted, instead it continued to grow during the '90s and has even diversified, becoming strongest during this time.

2.3.1. Who, and How Many, Are the Migrants in Transit

During the '80s this migratory flow consisted basically of Nicaraguans, Salvadorans, and Guatemalans due, as stated earlier, to the serious social conflicts occurring in their respective countries. By the '90s these flows were joined by those of Hondurans, Belizeans, and other South Americans (Colombians, Peruvians, and Ecuadorians), as well as people from other regions of the world (Africa and the Middle and Far East) (CNDH 22-23).

In the beginning, the migratory process of Central Americans to the United States was based primarily on a medium-income population, with the possibility of obtaining a tourist visa to legally cross Mexican territory, only to cross illegally into the United States later. The worsening political and economic crisis in the region, which favored the growth of the migratory flows, forced the Mexican government to broaden the legal requirements that Central Americans had to fulfill in order to enter the country. Notwithstanding, this measure did not limit the migratory flow; instead it only pushed it into illegality. Thus, the actions of the Mexican State transformed the migrants in transit towards the United States into delinquents that should be pursued, the way that Mexicans who migrate without documentation to the north are pursued.[8]

It was in this way that migrants in transit were converted into a contingent of "illegals." Mexicans know well what this means: a growing and almost total vulnerability to the abuses of the authorities of the country to which one arrives (Mexico, in this case) and, consequently, a greater tendency to suffer the violation of one's most elementary human rights. This type of policies will likewise make migrants more exploitable as labor because their lack of documentation and constant fear of deportation to their country of origin will force them to accept lower salaries and terrible working conditions (Peña, "Ilegalidad").

In spite of the fact that this migratory flow consists primarily of men, female participation has grown progressively. The majority of migrants are also between 15 and 35 years of age, the most productive for work. People of rural and urban origins can be found among them, as well as from diverse social sectors (from agricultural workers with few skills for work, to professionals and teachers) (CNDH 74-76); (Casillas and Castillo 111-114). The great majority (around 97%) of the deported migrants are Central American, particularly from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras (see table 6).

There is no data indicating how many migrants in transit cross Mexican territory to reach the United States —partly due to their illegal character— and therefore the growth of this flow must be deduced through the magnitude of the deportation of undocumented persons carried out by Mexico (see table 5). Although this number could not only mean an increase in the number of migrants in transit in this territory, but also a record of the hardening of the measures of surveillance for their apprehension and deportation, it is, until now, the only statistical tool that exists to measure this phenomenon. In fact, it is known that since the '80s the flows of migrants in transit have not only increased (a phenomenon that, beyond being statistically registered, has been experienced by the population inhabiting the border areas and the cities of arrival), but the legal provisions against migrants have been strengthened in favor of guarding against them. Thus, from a minimum number of 1,472 expulsions and deportations during 1970, this increased to 13,114 in 1980, 126,440 in 1990, and reached an average of 170,000 annual deportations in the year 2000 (see table 5).

2.3.2. The Path of Migrants in Transit

The Central Americans that fled the violence in their own countries were thrown into a state of illegality which, together with the economic destitution that the same war

TABLE 5

DEPORTATIONS AND EXPULSIONS OF UNDOCUMENTED MIGRANTS IN MEXICO, 1970-2000

Year	Number of Deportations and Expulsions	Mean Rate Of Annual Growth (%)	Rate Of Annual Growth (%)
1970	1 472	–	–
1975	2 225	8.6	51.2
1980	13 184	42.7	492.5
1985	7 262	-11.2	-44.9
1990	126 440	77.1	1 641.1
1995	99 791	-4.6	-21.1
2000	168 766	11.1	69.1

SOURCE: Author, based on Castillo and Palma 150; and Gomez, "Polleros" 40.

made even worse, contributed to consolidate the growth of a network of illegal migrant trafficking that gradually grew and diversified the services it offered, beginning to combine the traffic of undocumented people with smuggling of drugs, weapons, and cars (Jaramillo); (Santos Cruz 179); (Gomez, "Expansion"). As the U.S. and Mexican border guards increased in number (in Mexico to the south, all across the country, as well as on the northern border), the groups that engage in this trafficking also increased their number and the price of their "services." If in 1985 the cost of a trip from Central America to the United States was between $1,500 and $2,000 (traveling from El Salvador to Los Angeles), presently it has risen to close to $3,000.[9]

The trip from Central America is long and full of obstacles: first, one has to avoid control posts and checkpoints established by the Mexican immigration service as well as by other police and judicial institutions that are permitted to arrest migrants (the Mexican Attorney General's Office, the Customs Office, Federal Highway Police, the agencies for narcotics control, the Mexican Navy, the Mexican Army, and, even, State Police). All of this notwithstanding, one must not only evade the Mexican authorities in order to avoid being deported to one's country of origin, one must also avoid falling in the hands of a fearsome network of organized crime and corruption that these same authorities have created based on the extortion of migrants (CNDH). On the other hand, and as a result of the effort to circumvent these control posts, migrants must face the region's geographic obstacles, depending on the route chosen to cross into Mexico: the Suchiate river on the border between Mexico and Guatemala, the Lancandon Jungle, or the Pacific Ocean (see map 1). After crossing, many continue by foot along the railways, intending to board a freight train, which will expose them to less inspections. Fewer use the constantly inspected buses. Still others hire the services of traffickers to transport them in trucks that are evidently inappropriate for this use. Migrants traveling in closed vehicles, such as trailers, frequently die of asphyxia or due to overturned trucks.[10]

The search for little-used paths implies grave risks for migrants in transit, not only due to natural conditions, the road, or the type of transportation used, but also due to organized bands of criminals or of authorities who lie in wait to rob them, assault them, and, in the case of women and children, rape them (CNDH 78). Transit through Mexico constitutes an extremely dangerous route, which, according to the experience of the migrants in transit themselves, is taken "in an atmosphere of anxiety, despair, physical efforts, and hunger" (Castillo and Palma, "Transmigrantes" 5-6).

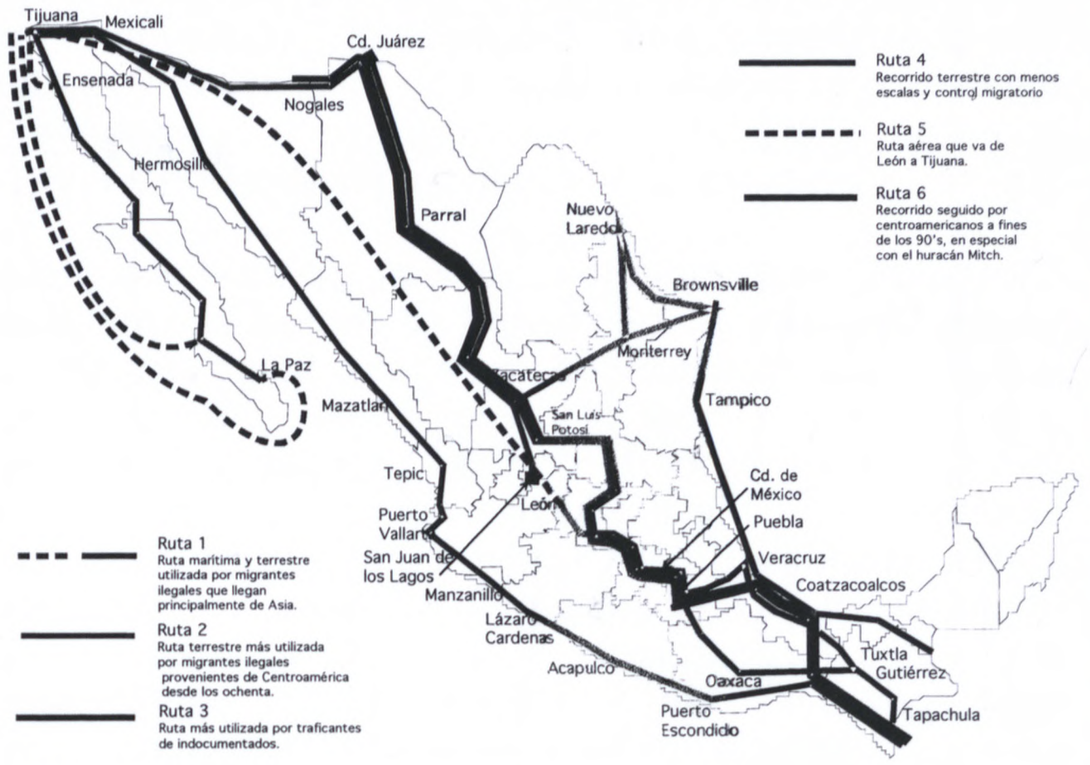
The routes towards the U.S. border are diverse (Gomez, "Rutas"); (Castillo Garcia); (Zarembo). Six are illustrated on map 1: the most often used during the '80s was the Pacific Route (route 2), followed by the Central ones (route 3 and 4). More recently, in the mid '90s, the Gulf Route (route 6) was included; it runs all along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico and was especially preferred by those Central American refugees affected by Hurricane Mitch at the end of 1998 (Zarembo). All of these paths have seen development, which means that they continue to function linked with broader networks: of organized bands for trafficking migrants, as well as civil and familial organizations that support migrants in transit. The evolution of these routes also leads to the evolution of places of transit (cities and agricultural workplaces) and of the points of arrival of these migrants in the United States (such as the cities of Los Angeles, San Francisco, Houston, New York, and Chicago).

By the beginning of the '80s the presence of Central American migrants (documented and undocumented) is observed in the Mexican cities of Tapachula, Oaxaca, Guadalajara, and Hermosillo (which correspond to route 2); in Puebla, Mexico City (where the greatest number of legal residents are found), and Monterrey (Central Routes), and, during the nineties, in Tuxtla Gutierrez, San Cristobal de las Casas, Tabasco, Veracruz, and Tampico (Gulf Routes) (Aguayo).[11]

As previously shown, transit through the Mexican territory can take a migrant anywhere from a few days to many years. This depends on the resources they posses to reach the United States. The poorest Central Americans, of urban and rural areas, use the path of transit migration as a means to acquire the necessary resources for advancing to the next point on the route. To obtain an income, they work in agriculture or urban services in the places through which they pass. Many of those who manage to reach the United States, if they are captured and deported, pretend to be Mexican in order to be returned to a place close to the border, from where they can begin anew their journey and try to cross over once more (Aguayo 45). Subsequent attempts imply renewing the search for resources with which to survive and pay the expenses of new trips; consequently, it is not difficult to find more and more Central Americans residing in the border areas on the north and south of Mexico or in the main cities of transit towards the north (Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Monterrey) (Casillas and Castillo 116-123).

An important element that must be highlighted about crossing the northern border is that the Central American migrants connect with the Mexican ones heading to the same places of work and residence in the United States. In this way,

Mapa 1
Rutas de transmigración en México, 2000.



Fuente:
Elaboración propia con base en Gómez [2001:34] y Zambero [1999:13]

the social and familial networks that Mexicans have historically woven to cross the border illegally are often shared with Central Americans.

2.3.3 Those Who Arrive In the United States

The Central American migrants who manage to reach the United States are primarily undocumented and considered "illegal" by the authorities and laws of that country. Nonetheless, understanding the illegal condition of the Central American immigrants also implies comprehending the policies regarding refugees and the admission of labor migration implemented by the U.S.

Before 1980 (a decade in which the armed conflicts unfolded more violently in Central America), Central Americans already traveled to the United States, but still in very reduced numbers: between 1951 and 1978 235,200 people entered that country legally (Aguayo 51). Various studies on this topic do not mention the existence of illegal flows of Central American migrants. Although this statistical gap does not necessarily imply that these flows did not exist, there is broad documentation referring to the flows of illegal immigrants of Mexican origin towards the United States. At least since the beginning of the twentieth century, Latin American labor in the U. S. has been considered an essential resource for the productive development of that country (Gomez Quiñonez), and the use of this cheap labor has been carried out by means of legal and illegal mechanisms.

In terms of the massive use of migrant labor, the United States is the country with the most experience in the world: beginning with the attraction of the flows of European workers at the end of the nineteenth century, to the continuous use, in the twentieth century, of Latino labor, or the acceptance of Asian migrants at different times in its history (Peña, **Migracion Internacional** 45-50). Thus, after a bi-national program of temporary use of Mexican labor, the United States decided to close the legal possibilities of agreements for large-scale employment of unskilled labor coming from Mexico. The end of the Bracero Program in the United States became the beginning of a migratory policy based on the illegality of the migrant workers. From this moment onwards (1965), the mechanisms have been gradually perfected to control these workers, who enter the United States with great difficulty and under conditions of extreme vulnerability for both their labor and civil rights (Peña, "Ilegalidad"); (Baird and McCaughan 261-263).

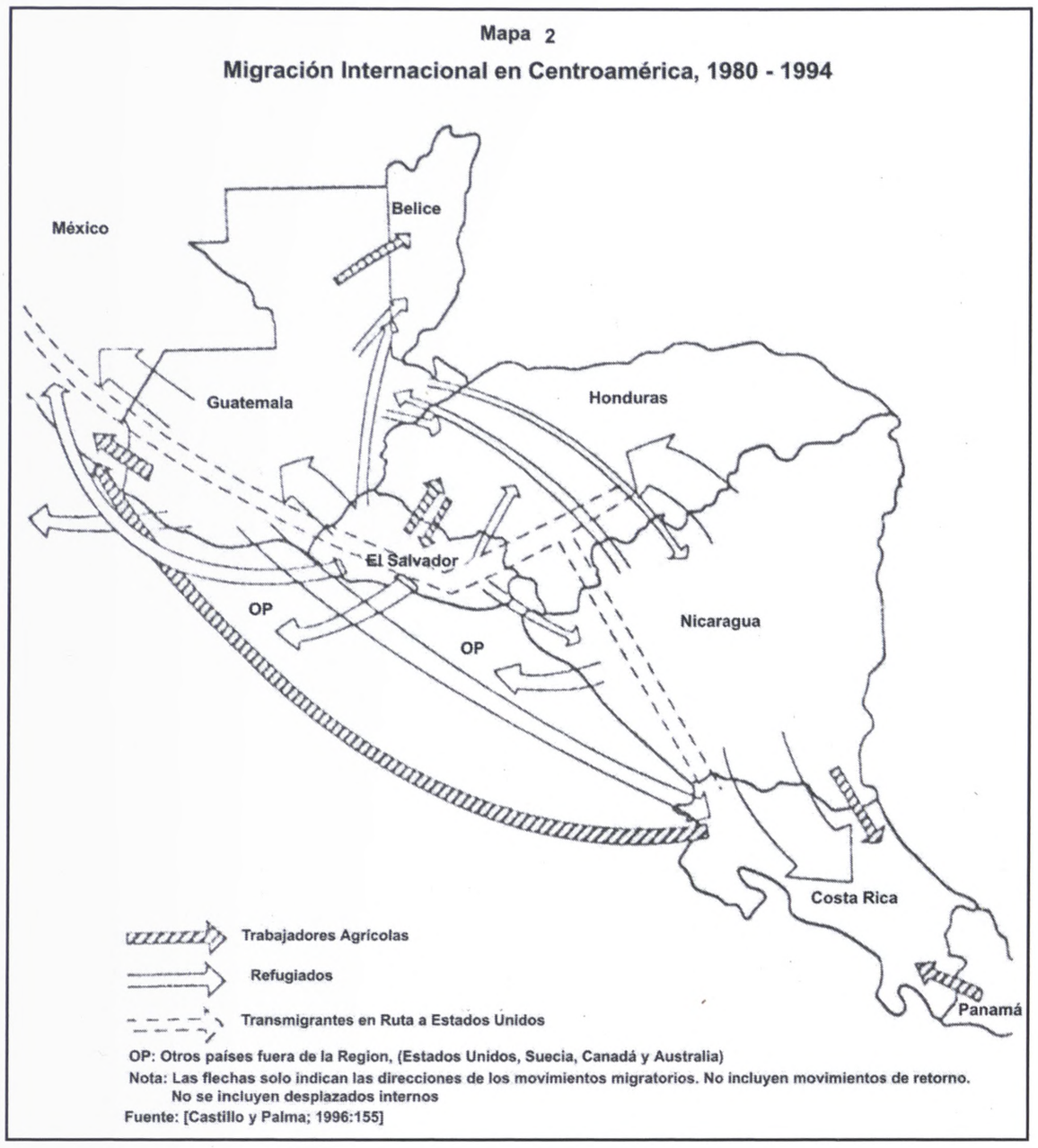
The social and political crisis of Central America ignited in the context of a growing, undocumented migration of Mexicans towards the north and the extension of legal measures to control it. Many of the Central American immigrants did not arrive in the United States looking for work or better wages, but seeking refuge instead. However, the massive wave of these migrants surpassed by far the quotas set by the U.S. government to grant asylum and refuge. This was an extremely restrictive policy[12] based on political management according to the interests of a foreign policy of "national security," more than on the true needs for refuge of a Central American population battered by a crisis in which the U.S. government itself did not exactly keep a "passive" or "neutral" attitude. On this point, Susan Jonas states that

> Throughout the Cold War, U.S. migratory policies depended, to a large extent, on the geopolitical (anticommunist) priorities of its foreign policy. [...] The most obvious example of the use of the concept of "national security" for the establishment of a migratory policy based on foreign policy considerations was the refugee policy, opposed to applying equal standards in terms of human rights [...]; accepting Cuban exiles while rejecting, among others, Haitian asylum-seekers (Jonas 407-408).[13]

TABLE 4
CENTRAL AMERICAN POPULATION, RESIDENT IN THE UNITED STATES, 1980-1990 ACCORDING TO THE U.S. CENSUS

Country of birth	Population 1980	%[1]	Population 1990	%[1]	Decennial Growth Rate 1980-1990
Costa Rica	29 639	0.7	43 530	0.5	3.92
El Salvador	94 447	2.2	465 433	5.5	17.29
Guatemala	63 073	1.4	225 739	2.7	13.60
Honduras	39 154	0.9	108 923	1.3	10.77
Nicaragua	44 166	1.0	168 659	2.0	14.34
Central America	270 479	6.2	1 012 284	12.0	14.11

[1] Referring to the total population of foreign-born residents of the United States.
SOURCE: Castillo and Palma 151.



Likewise, with regards to U.S. migratory policy for Central America, this could not be clearer:

> Ironically, U.S. involvement, through support for counterinsurgent armies in El Salvador and Guatemala, contributed indirectly to the mass exodus of refugees. On the other hand, this same policy led to systematic rejection of applications for asylum and refuge by Salvadorans and Guatemalans, arguing that they were anti-government and "subversive" (meaning, "in opposition to friendly regimes"), in sharp contrast to the acceptance of refugees coming from "communist" regimes, such as the Nicaraguan Sandinistas (Jonas 408).

Thus, a migratory flow that, obeying political and social causes, deserved to be treated to refuge and political asylum, was transformed by the U.S. government's priorities into a flow of illegal aliens who, naturally, facing lack of support for their survival, had to find employment in the productive processes of the United States economy. It is worth emphasizing that the international treaties concerning refugees, established by the United Nations, are systematically violated by the most powerful nation in the world, which was paradoxically built up by international migrations, and that, also, is a self-proclaimed "defender of the democratic rights" of the world.

Looking at the official figures of legal and illegal immigrants from the countries of the Central American region, these numbers show enormous differences: according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the Central American population residing in that country in 1980 consisted of 270,479 people, of whom approximately 50% were undocumented. By 1990, there were already more than one million Central Americans, a figure that also included a 50% proportion of undocumented persons (see table 4). Although these calculations by the U.S. government include an estimate of the number of undocumented migrants, and the recognition that most of them come from El Salvador and Guatemala, these estimates are far below those given by the Central American

TABLE 3
CENTRAL AMERICA: INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL EMIGRATIONS OF COUNTRIES IN CONFLICT, 1980-1996

	Nicaragua	El Salvador	Guatemala
Internal Emigration	350 000	400 000	188 000
Displaced	350 000	400 000	188 000
External Emigration	673 100	1 894 700	1 415 650
Costa Rica	280 000	6 500	
Honduras	200 000	33 000	430
Guatemala	23 100	180 000	
Nicaragua		22 000	720
Belize		3 200	22 500
Mexico		150 000	192 0001
United States	170 0002	1 500 0003	1 200 0004
Total Population (1996)	4 400 000	5 900 000	10 600 000
Total Emigration	1 023 100	2 294 700	1 603 650
External emigration as Percentage of Total Population	15.3	32.1	13.4
Total emigrationof as Percentage Total Population	23.3	38.9	15.1

NOTES:
[1] Compound figure of acknowledged migrants (42,000) and unacknowledged migrants (150,000).
[2] Figures from U.S. Census, 1990.
[3] FMLN figure.
[4] Figure from Guatemalan government, 1996.
SOURCE: Author, based on CEPAL 9-37; Aguayo 21-28; Rincon et al.; and FMLN.

governments. In the U.S. Census of 1990, for example, 225,739 Guatemalan residents in the U.S. were registered (see table 4), of which half were undocumented. Notwithstanding, around 1996 the Guatemalan government calculated a population of 1,200,000 Guatemalans in the United States, of which 45% were undocumented (Rincon, Jonas, and Rodriguez).

In the case of El Salvador, the other Central American country with the largest number of migrants entering the United States, the Office of International Relations of the Frente Farabundo Marti de Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) calculated that around 1996 there were approximately 1,500,000 legal and illegal Salvadorans in U.S. territory (see table 3) (FMLN 5). The figures provided by the 1990 U.S. Census place this number at only 465,433 Salvadorans, of which 50% are undocumented (see table 4).

As is evident, the statistical figures offered by the U.S. and the Central American governments are extremely different. In spite of the difficulty of using the numbers related to the Central American population residing in the United States, it is necessary to risk taking up the figures estimated by the Central American governments and human rights organizations in the United States, since those coming from the INS or the population census are too low for the reality experienced in those countries.

Closer observation of the figures for Salvadoran and Guatemalan migrants in the United States in relation to the total population of their respective countries of origin shows that approximately 25% of the Salvadorans in the world live in the United States. The same goes for 11% of Guatemalans. Thus, although the Central American migration may not be considered the most important to the United States in terms of its size, viewed from the perspective of the countries of emigration, the proportion is enormous compared to the total of their population, leaving an incredible deficit or loss of human wealth, even if the total sum seems small next to the more than 25 million Mexicans in the United States during the same years (Peña, **Migracion Internacional**). In fact, while the U.S. population Census of 1990 counts the total sum of Central Americans on its territory at approximately one million, alternative estimates in the mid nineties would indicate that the figure is closer to four million.

The influence of the Central American migrant population in the United States in the economy, culture, and, in sum, in the society of their countries of origin is very important, not only due to the number of remittances migrants send their families, but also to the migratory networks established to attract family members to the United States or to establish cultural and political exchanges between the communities of origin and the ones formed to the north (Lungo, Eekhoff and Baires).

The Central American migrants who arrive in the United States are of diverse origins (in the Guatemalan case the majority are of rural or indigenous origins), which naturally leads them to seek employment in agricultural areas in the U.S. However, as their stay in the country lengthens, they head in greater numbers to the cities and search for work in the textile or construction industries, or in urban services (Rincon, Jonas, and Rodriguez). In the Salvadoran case, the proportion of urban population is greater, which, to a larger extent, leads new migratory waves to head directly to cities to find employment as bricklayers in construction work, kitchen help in restaurants, and cleaning and maintenance workers in the men's case; and in domestic service, commerce, sewing, and even prostitution, in the women's (Repak). The main U.S. cities in which Central Americans are concentrated are: Los Angeles, San Francisco, Washington, Chicago, New York, and Houston (Aguayo 51). Likewise, considering the states as points of arrival, those with agricultural activity that is important for the U.S. economy stand out, such as California, Florida, and Texas, as well as New York and Illinois (Rincon, Jonas, and Rodriguez).

Regarding the working conditions that these migrants experience, those who enter illegally share with the Mexicans the same conditions of discrimination, overexploitation, and low wages, while those who are legal residents or possess temporary permits have better possibilities. Another difference exists between those who perform work in urban areas and those in rural ones. Those who work in the countryside suffer more adverse working conditions, and among them, indigenous people receive the worst treatment, as is the case of the Guatemalan Kanjobals who work in Florida.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the Central American migratory process acquired its contemporary character beginning with the wars unleashed in some of the region's countries during the '80s, its antecedents can be traced to earlier periods in its history and, related to this, to the difficult relationship to the country whose power and influence has been decisive in the outbreak and "solution" of the armed conflicts: the United States. Likewise, although the main objective of the present study is reflection about Central American labor migrations, I have observed how these are interrelated to other migrations caused by political, social and environmental problems. Therefore, although the Central American migrations are mostly caused by violence, sooner or later they have been transformed into migrations in search of work.

It is very important to establish that labor migrations tend to become generalized as the principal ones within the large migratory flows of population, which does not mean that I intend to ignore (as national governments and even international organizations do) the importance and the role that categories such as "political refugee" or "internally displaced person" have, particularly because the immediate aid that a group or social sector can receive depends on them. This aid can, in some cases, make the difference between life and death. Notwithstanding, within a long-term perspective, the movement of large contingents of population, in times of war or peace, of economic prosperity or crisis, brings about changes in the demographic composition of territories and, thinking of them in terms of the dynamics of the accumulation of capital, represents the constitution of new labor markets, or their reorganization. It is no coincidence that the displaced populations, seeking refuge or expelled due to the economic crisis in the region, should have relocated to the cities, plantations producing agricultural goods for export, or the agricultural centers where labor was required, within the region as well as in Mexico and the United States.

It is important to recognize that the population of Central America follows a road already traveled by Mexican migrant workers, to become the labor force that U.S. capital can use for its productive processes. Needless to say, for U.S. employers, these labor markets have been opened in the most advantageous conditions and, of course, the most vulnerable ones for the workers themselves (illegality translates to lack of civil, labor, and political rights and the attraction or repulsion of

migrants according to the needs and conditions of accumulation of the U.S. economy). This great industrial reserve army of the United States permits the economy of that country to be more competitive and, in that sense, the Central Americans have therefore become the second most important labor market on the continent for the United States, after Mexico.

I cannot end without stressing the sad role of the Mexican government in the process of transit migrations of Central Americans to the United States: treating Central American immigrants in Mexico as the Mexican migrant is treated in the United States: as an illegal subject, a delinquent who must be caught and deported without any consideration (for example, if perhaps they are fleeing political persecution in their country of origin), and playing the role of security guard for the backyard of the U.S. If we were to accept that, according to present numbers, approximately 25 to 30 million Mexicans live in the United States, should the role of this government not be to side with Latin American undocumented migrants, instead of on the side of the U.S. employer that denies them labor, civil, and political rights? Up to now, this is a matter pending for the Mexican government.

Mtra. Ana Alicia Peña López actualmente trabaja en la La Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, unidad Azcapotzalco, como profesora visitante en la carrera de Economía, en el área de Economía Política. También es profesora en la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, en la Facultad de Economía, en el área de Economía Política, en ambas escuelas imparte materias de Economía Política y Migración Laboral. Actualmente esta realizando estudios en el Doctorado en Ciencias Políticas y Sociales en la UNAM, en la orientación de sociología laboral. Su correo electrónico es aliciap68@hotmail.com.

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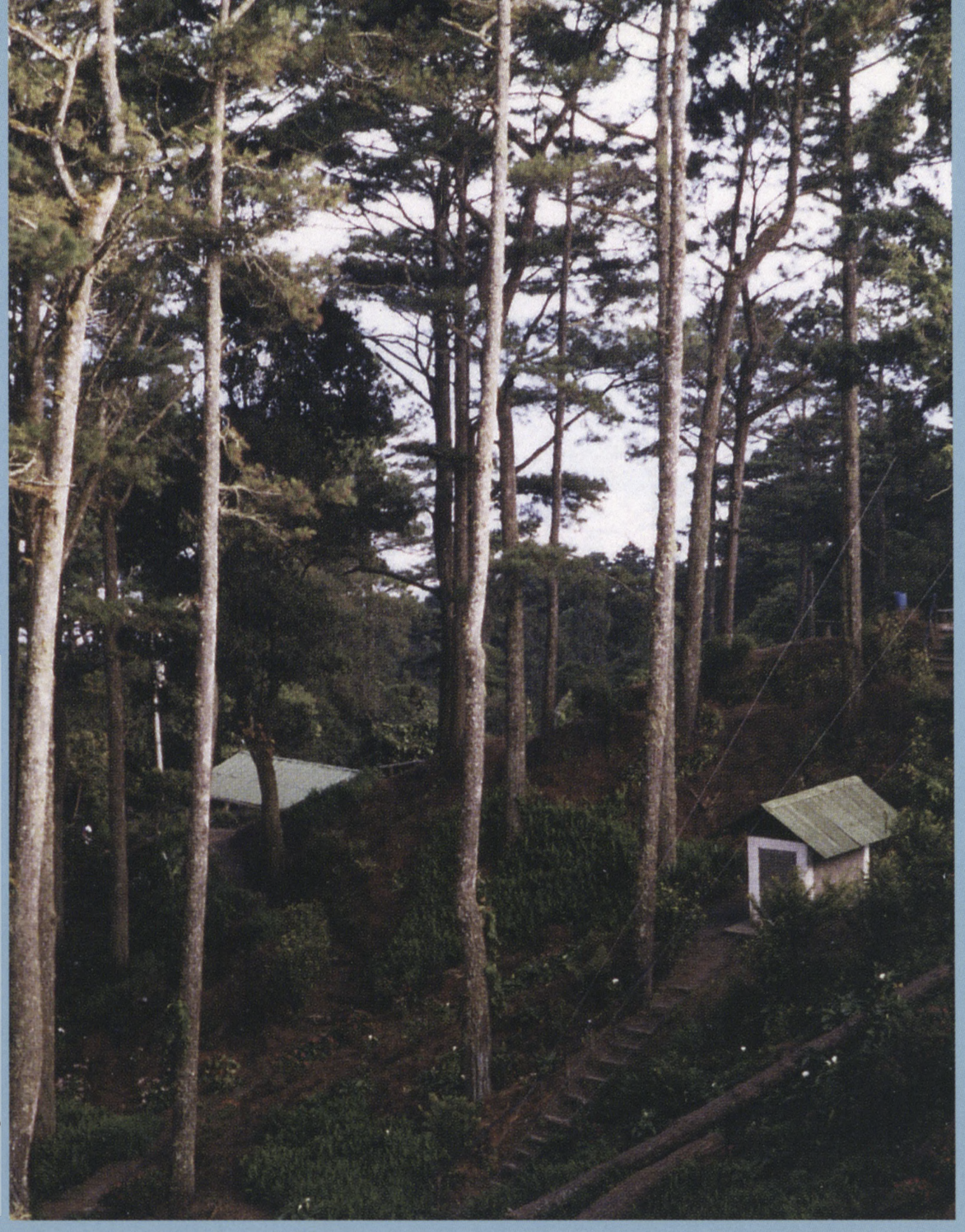

Photo by Claudia Morales Haro. El Salvador, 1999

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NOTES

1. It is important to note that cepal's study does not include Belize and Panama in its analysis.

2. A deeper analysis of the way in which capital makes predatory use of the domestic community through the temporary use of its labor can be found in Meillasoux (1987).

3. Recalling what Marx understood as proletarian: "Proletarian can only be understood, from an economic perspective, as a wage-earning worker that produces and valorizes 'capital' and who is thrown into the streets as soon as he becomes superfluous for the needs of the valorization of 'Monsieur Capital.'" (Marx 761)

4. Concerning this period, it is necessary to establish a difference from Aguayo's formulation. For him the migrations, considered results of "structural factors that distinguish underdeveloped countries from developed ones," are the product of "reasons other than economic ones." For Aguayo the main cause is the existence of an old Central American tradition of migrating to the United States, generally to California. According to the Statistical Abstract of the United States, between 1951 and 1978 235,200 Central Americans migrated legally to that country. I believe that Aguayo does not understand that the "structural determinants" or the "tradition," as he calls it, result from the dynamics that capitalist accumulation imposes on underdeveloped countries and that these are *economic*, in spite of being intimately linked or influenced by social, political, and/or cultural determinants. Regardless, I cannot fail to recognize that Aguayo's text is now a classic in understanding this subject.

5. According to the Convention of the United Nations (UN) relating to *refugees* (1951), these are defined as "any person who owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it." *Internally displaced persons* are characterized as "those people who have been forced to change their place of residence within the same country for reasons related to the political and military development of the regional crisis" (Instituto Interamericano de Derechos Humanos 27 and 69).

6. For a more detailed analysis of internal and international migrations within and outside of the Central American region, see my work "Una Reflexion Critica de la Migracion Laboral Centroamericana, 1980-2000" in Sotelo, Adrian and Acevedo, Guadalupe (Coordinators), *El Debate Latinoamericano Actual: Desarrollo y Reestructuracion*, in the process of being published.

7. On this point, cepal (34) states: "According to diverse testimonies, a large percentage of unrecognized residents obtained temporary immigration permits with the guarantee that some owners would provide them jobs on their farms or in other productive units, *although frequently* for a lower salary than that which Hondurans would demand."

8. A detailed description of the first reactions of the Mexican government to the rise in the flow of Central American migrants in transit can be found in Aguayo; concerning the increasing militarization of the southern border, consult the text of Miguel Angel de los Santos.

9. It is worth noting that, for Central Americans, the cost of their transfer across the Mexican territory to the border of the United States is the "lowest," considering the distances and difficulties of introducing them into the U.S. The other migrants who enter Mexico through the southern border in their journey towards the north, pay much higher sums: South Americans pay between five and ten thousand dollars, Indians pay between thirty and fifty thousand, and the Chinese and other Asians pay between 50 and 60 thousand dollars (Gomez 35). A recent study of the Mexican Attorney General's office (Procuraduria General de la Republica), titled "Offenses committed against the General Population Law," states that the traffic of undocumented migrants in Mexico is considered the fourth most profitable illicit activity, after drug traffic, possession of firearms, and patrimonial crimes (Castillo Garcia).

10. It is sufficient to review local and national newspapers to note the large quantity of reports referring to accidents and the dangers to which migrants are exposed in their journey towards the "Land of Opportunity." Regarding this, see Lopez Ordaz.

11. Following the routes of migrants in transit is a difficult task because, in the illegal flows, there is no official register of their entry into the country, much less of their transit through the cities or agricultural work areas. The data mentioned here are limited to journalistic information about the traffic of migrants or the deportation of Central Americans carried out in various parts of the national territory. Notwithstanding, it is important to outline the routes of the migrants in transit here, to show the growth of the phenomenon not only looking at its volume (which must be calculated in an indirect manner, as well, through the number of annual deportations), but also at the breadth and diversity of the places through which the migrants pass (work, and live in), transforming Mexicans as they go.

12. In 1983, during the Central American civil war, the United States set the quota for refugees to be accepted from all of Latin America at 2,000. By the middle of the same year, the U.S. government had only accepted 22 applications for asylum from the region (Aguayo 113).

13. Towards the end of the 1980s, Nicaraguan asylum-seekers enjoyed an acceptance rate of 26% compared to 2.6% for Salvadorans and 1.8% for Guatemalans (Jonas 408).